RELIGION, POWER AND THE SOCIAL ORDER IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY

Anthony Okon Ben
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar
benanthony21@yahoo.com
+2348034397844

Ibebidamiobhedo Benanthony Okon
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar
ibebibenanthony@yahoo.com
+2348073741188

ABSTRACT

African societies have in time past created their own traditional systems rooted in religion which was used in controlling the social environment with multiple acculturation and adaptations. The history of the development of law as a mechanism for maintaining social order has been based on the fact that human beings though social animals, are by nature "selfish" and "competitive" that peaceful co-existence is impossible without rules and regulations which must be observed or violated at the risk of sanction or punishment. This work identifies the over dependence of Africans on Western laws which are foreign to African world-view. It therefore seeks to examine how African societies have been able to maintain social order through the exercise of power by the appropriate institutions or persons. This

work will rely on secondary research materials, using a religio-historical, sociological approach with descriptive and analytical framework. This work concludes that Africans had various means of social control for sustenance, growth, and development of the society before the advent of the Europeans and Christian missionaries.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic study of various societies in the world over the years reveals that although societies differ in form, structure and civilization, there are certain features and commonality in human societies. It has been observed that human beings could live together peaceably only if they were compelled to do so by threat of physical force. That is, social order is dependent on the force of coercion. Every society has thus developed certain measures to appropriate power to maintain social order. The difference perhaps lies in the measures adopted and sustained in maintaining social order. In European societies for instance, there exists, a set of organized and legally framed laws, rules and regulations which guide human behavior and conduct in the society. African societies on the other hand, are guided by a set of traditional ethical principles, customs, norms and values.

Traditional ethics in the words of Chike Ekeopara refers to "the norms, precepts, principles and moral codes which regulate the conduct and actions of individuals in African societies" (2011:143). These ethical principles he maintained, "helped to maintain and ensure social order and stability in traditional African societies" (Ekeopara 2011:143). However, as with all societies, the mere existence of these ethical principles it must be noted, do not guarantee social order and are not in themselves operative or effective if not properly enforced through the exercise of power by the appropriate persons or institutions. In traditional African societies, the religious, cultural and traditional beliefs of the people in supernatural beings, powers and forces such as deities, ancestors and spirits, helps in the enforcement of social norms, customs and societal values and thus bringing about social order in these communities.

THE CONCEPT OF POWER

Power has often been understood in its limited sense as "physical might" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Writing on power, Lavenda and Emily pointed out that there are various dimensions of power and a view of power must not be limited to coercive power but must include other dimensions of power such as persuasive power (106-107). Power can generally be defined as "the ability to make someone conform to your desire" (Nwankwo 2002:10). This is usually achieved through the application of force or the threat of it. It has also been defined as "the ability to attain goals, control events and maintain influence over others even in the face of opposition" (Arinze 2009:96). Power however, in this study is understood to be beyond physical might to include "legal or official authority, capacity or right; possession of control, authority or influence over others" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This power need not be controlled or possessed by an individual alone but also by an institution whether political, moral, religious, socio-economic, cultural or legal.

For Max Webber, power is "the ability to achieve desired ends despite resistance from others" (qtd in Macionis 2005:398). Macionis noted however, that no society can exist for long if power derives solely from the application of force – physical might or psychological coercion as this may only lead people to break the rules whenever they have the opportunity (2005:398). Social order therefore, can only be achieved if power is exercised within the framework of legitimacy such that it is recognized and respected by the people. In African societies, the power to influence and compel others into one's will is usually vested in certain individuals as well as religious and cultural institutions which are perceived as having divine power owing largely to the traditional belief systems and world-view held in common by Africans.

SOCIAL ORDER AND CONTROL

No society can exist, and peacefully so, without the element of social order. Social order in this context means "a condition in which the situation of life and everything in society is controlled ... where individuals perform their correct functions in the society" (Ekeopara 28). Social order therefore implies "conformity by individuals to the natural, moral or spiritual systems governing things in the universe" (Lorimer et al 1994:705). Social order therefore brings about stability and a state of equilibrium. Calvert Randall noted that "social order is a continuing, relatively stable pattern of behavior, and it may entail

self-seeming acts by the individual members of a society as in the 'cooperation' aspect of social order" (Randall 1995:6). He explained that social order could be based on cooperation by individuals to the societal norms.

In African societies, Eteng noted that social order and stability is achieved through conformity with the cultural norms or social norms, folkways, customary rules which prohibits bad behaviors and activities such as murder, suicide, witchcraft, incest, stealing among many others (Eteng 1980:339). These social norms according to Ferraro are what every society defines as "normal, proper, or expected ways of behaving, which serve as behavioral guidelines and help the society work smoothly" (2004:289). Conformity to these social norms however cannot be achieved without some level of social control. Thus, social order is achieved generally through social control. Social control can be internal or external; formal and informal. Internalized controls are basically cultural control through belief and values which are deeply internalized in the minds of individuals, so that they become personally responsible for their own conduct (Haviland 2010:283). Citing the example of the belief in ancestors by the Wade people of Papua New Guinea, Haviland stated that "... gossip, criticism, fear of supernatural forces (such as spirits of dead ancestors)... serve as effective deterrents to antisocial behavior" (2010:283).

Externalized controls on the other hand, involve sanctions which are "...designed to encourage conformity to social norms" (Haviland 2010:284). In essence, social norms cannot truly be upheld or respected without sanctions. While some members of the society willingly and reasonably observe the societal norms, many others would exhibit all manner of antisocial behavior without the fear of sanctions. Yet, these negative behaviors continue to exist amidst these sanctions, which may be positive or negative. Positive sanctions refer to those encouragements and incentives in the form of awards, titles, recognition and support from the society and its members for good behavior while negative sanctions include punishments such as fines, isolation, imprisonment, corporal punishment, criticism, or ostracism (Haviland 2010:284).

Social order can also be attained through formal or informal means of social control. Formal means of social control is usually attained through the law. Informal means of social control include all other instruments other than law which helps to bring about social order in the society. These various means of informal control would be discussed briefly in the later part of this paper with particular reference to African societies which is made possible chiefly owing to

their worldview and belief in supernatural beings. Today, the most widely acceptable and commonly used form of achieving social order is through the law which Redmond, described as "rules of conduct imposed by a State upon its members and enforced by its courts ... the object of which is to enforced certain standards of behavior among citizens in the interest of peace and good order" (qtd. in Mitee, 2001:20).

AFRICAN WORLD-VIEW AND SOCIAL ORDER

The African continent consists of a wide variety of cultures, traditions, belief systems and world-views thus,

> any attempt to generalize about the nature of African religion (or world-view in this case), risks implying that there is homogeneity among all African cultures. In fact,...each of the more than 40 modern nations that occupy the continent has its own particular history and they in turn comprise of numerous ethical groups with different languages and unique customs and beliefs (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions, 17).

These variations notwithstanding, Robert Lystad, noted that "despite the local variations which makes each indigenous religion distinctive, certain features are wide spread throughout ... Africa" (qtd. in The Encyclopedia Americana 276-277). This makes it "... possible to identify similarities in their world-views and ritual processes across geographic and ethnic boundaries." (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions, 17).

THE AFRICAN WORLD-VIEW AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Etymologically, the term "world-view" is a derivative of the German word *weltanschauung*, composed of *welt* (world) and *anschauung* (view or outlook). It is a concept fundamental to the German philosophy and epistemology which refers to a world-wide perception. A comprehensive world-view implies the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society comprising the entirety of the individual or society's knowledge and point-of-view, including natural philosophy, fundamental, existential and normative postulates or themes or values, emotions and ethics. For James W. Sire, a world-view is that which "... provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being" (James 2014:15-16).

John Fowler defined world-view as "a construct about the

makeup of life and its struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics and history. It is a construct that provides a point of departure, a sense of direction, a locus of destination and strategy of unity for human taught, life and action"(2014:7). This construct according to Z. Mathema, satisfies a fourfold need: first, the need to unify thought and life; second, the need to define good life and find hope and meaning in life; third, the need to guide thoughts; fourth, the need to guide action. He noted further that at the core level of every person's being lies the world-view that constitutes what Charles Craft described as the "control box" of culture that determines thinking, acting or doing and determining values (2014).

The African world-view sees the universe as "... a unity of being, not a combination somehow of the physical and the spiritual, of the body and soul" (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religion, 18). The universe for the African thus functions harmoniously, that is the physical and spiritual, hence the distinction between the sacred and the profane tend to be far less sharp in Africa than in Western cultures. According to Innocent Asouzu, the African world-view recognizes and holds firmly to certain values which he identifies as necessary for the correct functioning of the society. These values include; Africans have strong regard for things spiritual, high sense of morality, uncompromising regard for community and pride for his heritage (Asouzu, 3).

This sense of communal solidarity produces a great regard for authority which is usually perceived as divine and governs the society based on its moral principles which the community holds in one accord and jointly enforces them. Mbiti has stressed that this is the "cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man," that is, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1992:108). This belief influences greatly the manner in which Africans relate to one another which brings about peaceful co-existence, order and stability.

The African world-view is basically religious and traditional. It is handed down from one generation to another. Also, where belief alone do not suffice in bringing about social order, African societies appropriate power to certain persons and institution to enforce adherence to the traditional beliefs, ethics and values of the society. These jointly function as the informal means of social control in African societies. One of the basic mechanisms of social control in traditional African societies is found in their belief in supernatural forces such as gods, deities, witchcraft, spirits, ancestors and traditional religious institutions. In this study, the belief in ancestors and their veneration would be our focus. Described as "the living

dead" by Mbiti, ancestors are those elderly members of the society who led respectable and peaceful lives and died "a good death", that is, a natural death. These persons are elevated to the status of supernatural beings upon their death and considered fully functioning members of the descent group (Ferraro 2004:292). These ancestors are venerated and appeased through sacrifices and proper behavior and prayed to or called upon in times of crisis. Ferraro noted that "living members are believed to be rewarded or punished, depending on how well they meet these obligations (that is, offering of sacrifices and proper behavior)" (2004:292). Citing the example of the Lugbara society of Uganda, John Middleton observed that:

> The well-being of the entire kinship group is ensured only if people behave in socially appropriate ways. The Lugbara believe that personal and group tragedies are a direct result of the transgression of certain social norms, such as showing disrespect to living and dead elders, adultery, incest, assault, or homicide (qtd. in Ferraro, 2004:292)

Thus, fear of punishment by the spirits of the ancestors for antisocial behavior compel living members of the society to adhere to the social norms and ethics of the people, thereby resulting in social order. There are traditional institutions in various African societies which help to regulate and maintain social order. These institutions are believed to be platforms of divine or spiritual beings and forces and having the power (both physical and spiritual) to either punish or reward people based on their behavior.

African societies often parade the appearances and performances of both beautiful and dreaded masquerades especially during festive periods usually by members of various secret societies. While a foreigner might see them as mere cultural or artistic display, the Africans understand and believe them to be something very significant to the society. Daniel Offiong pointed out that members of the Poro Society were, "in control of social and political life through the intervention of masked and costumed agents who were construed to be ancestral spirits." (2). According to George Harley, a medical missionary who worked in West Africa for over three decades, the Poro spirit masks were used in all important events to stop village quarrels or to control fighting warriors, to catch, try, condemn, punish or even execute social criminals; to intensify the holiday spirit of great occasions, to promote fertility of the fields

45

and bountiful harvest, to cultivate public sentiment, regulate hygiene, build bridges and sacred houses (qtd. in Offiong, 2)

In the same way, members of Ekpo and Ekpe society among the Ibibio, Oron and Efik tribes of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria respectively, claim to be acting as representatives of their ancestors because of the special position that the ancestor occupy in African communities in enforcing social norms and conformity (Offiong, 26). Thus, the Ekpo and Ekpe society "exacts obedience and compliance from members and non-members in the name of the ancestors" (Offiong, 26). These societies have existed from the pre-colonial to colonial times and continue to exist, though in diluted forms in present post-colonial African society and to a large extent, continue to perform the same duties of maintaining social order, especially in rural communities where the effects of Western culture and Christianity has eaten so deeply into the community to falsify, destroy and eradicate these belief systems.

CONCLUSION

The importance of social order cannot be overemphasized. Social order brings about social stability by ensuring compliance to the norms of the society. Randall has noted that without social order, the society would exist in chaotic state of injustice and violence as survival would be on the basis of might as each individual continues to seek his personal desire over and above the interest of others. It is through social order that the security of lives and properties of the members of the society is ensured. Social order in the society entails that individual behavior and conduct of the members of the society are reasonably controlled and regulated such that any act which is considered antisocial, is accompanied by the appropriate sanction or punishment thus, deterring any conduct which puts at risk the lives and properties of others. According to Bharat Kumar, social unity is achieved through social control because individual behavior is regulated in accordance with the established norms of the society thereby bringing about uniformity of behavior.

Social order entails that there is an expected way of behavior and an implied condition of conformity by the individual if he must be regarded as an acceptable member of the society. Pre-colonial African societies were erroneously described as being lawless and having no form of order by European ethnographers and anthropologists. This work has however been able to show that like every other society in the world, African societies had from its pre-colonial forms been able to devise means largely by local groups

using informal means through which social order was achieved for the sustenance and maintenance of order, control, peace, growth and development of the society.

REFERENCES

Arinze, Okeke M. (2009). *Introduction to Social Sciences*, Onitsha: Najutel.

Asouzu, Innocent I. *Introduction to African Philosophy*

Ekeopara Chike A. (2011). *Ethical Order and Stability in Traditional Igbō Society*, Calabar: University of Calabar Press

Eteng, I. A. (1980). "Changing Patterns of Socialization and their Impacts in National Development" *Readings in Social Sciences: Issues in National Development.* (ed.) Amucheazi Elochukwu, Enugu: 4th ed., 337- 374

Ferraro, Gary (2004). *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, (5thedt.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Haviland, William A. (2010). *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

James W. Sire (2014). "The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview" (Catalogue pp. 15-16) 02/10/2014

John Fowler (2014). In a Presentation of the Faith and Learning Seminar, University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya: 1998. www.ministrymagazine.org, 02/10/2014

Kumar, Bharat. "What is the Importance of Social Control in Society" Retrieved from www.preservarticles.com, 12/10/2014

Lorimer, Lawrence T. et al. (eds) (1994). *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of English Language*, New York: Lexicon

Lystad Robert A. "African Worldview" *The Encyclopedia Americanna.*

Macionis J. J and Plammer K. (2005). *Sociology: A Global Introduction* (3rd), Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

Mathema Zacchacus A. (2014). www.ministrymagazine.org, 02/10/2014

Mbiti John S. (1992). *African Religious and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann.

Mbiti John S. (1991). *Introduction to African Religion,* London: Heinemann Educational.

Mitee Ebenezer Leesi (2001). *Nigerian Legal System: A Fundamental Approach*, Vol. 1, Rivers: Ebenezer.

Nwankwo B. C. (2002). *Authority in Government: Nigeria and World Politics in Focus*, Onitsha: Abbot.

Offiong Daniel A. *Continuity and Change in Some Traditional Societies of Nigeria*, Zaria: Ahmedu Bello

Randall, Calvert L. (1995). "Explaining Social Order: Internalization, External Enforcement or Equilibrium?" University of Rochester Working Paper No. 4, March

www.wallis.rochester.edu 12/10/2014

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF RELIGION, EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY